What Is the Keswick Movement? (Part 1)

March 30, 2022 by Ken Yates in Blog - exchanged life theology, Keswick theology

Those who read books on theology will sometimes run across something called the Keswick movement. (The "w" is silent and is pronounced "KEH-zuck" by Americans or "KEH-zick" by Brits.) Sometimes it is called the higher life, exchanged life, or victorious life movement. Even if you don't see the actual titles, we have all heard the terminology connected with this movement. This terminology includes phrases such as, "let go and let God," "I was saved years ago, but not until today did I surrender my life to Christ," or "I dedicated my life to Christ (after initial salvation)."

Occasionally, GES receives a question about the Keswick movement. People wonder about its history, its teachings, and if it is compatible with Free Grace theology. In this blog, as well as in the one that follows, I would like to address these issues.

It is difficult to discuss any theological movement because there are differences among the people associated with it. The Keswick movement is no different. The main tenet deals with sanctification, that is, how one is to live a life that pleases God. In general, its roots can be traced to the teachings of John Wesley. He preached a second work of grace, after initial salvation, that was needed to live a victorious Christian life. These teachings would eventually lead to Pentecostalism, in which the second work of grace would be equated with the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. Wesley taught Christian perfectionism, which meant that if a Christian had this second work of grace, he could avoid all known, intentional sins. Wesley himself, however, did not see this second work of grace as the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

But others, not associated with Wesley or Pentecostalism, adopted another kind of Keswickian view of sanctification. They rejected the idea of perfectionism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. The list of well-known adherents to this view of the Keswick movement is impressive, even though there were differences among them in some details. These include J. Hudson Taylor of the China Inland

Mission, D. L. Moody and many at the early Moody Bible Institute, Billy Graham, the Christian Missionary Alliance, C. I. Scofield, and many at Dallas Theological Seminary, including W. H. Griffith Thomas, Lewis Sperry Chafer, John Walvoord, and Charles Ryrie. The Scofield Reference Bible, in its notes, supports aspects of the movement.

We can call those who hold to the Keswick view of sanctification but not associated with Wesley or Pentecostalism as traditional Evangelical adherents. It is among these Evangelical writers that questions arise about the relationship with the Keswick movement and Free Grace theology.

These traditional evangelicals make a sharp distinction between initial salvation (justification) and sanctification. A person can be eternally saved but not grow in sanctification. There are many believers who live carnal lives. There are many Christians who live such defeated spiritual lives.

In order to live victoriously, there needs to be a second work of God in the believer's life. This happens when there is a crisis of some sort. It happens after salvation, perhaps years later. The Christian understands the need to live in a godly way and sees that he does not do so. This crisis can be described as seeing the need to be filled with the Holy Spirit, or the need to make Jesus Lord of your life. Some, such as Moody, said it was the need to be baptized by the Spirit, even though he did not see this baptism as resulting in speaking in tongues. He did say some believers are baptized by the Spirit in this way and others are not.

Eternal salvation is the first work of God in the life of a believer. The second one leads to abiding in Christ and growing in grace. It is an emotional experience, where the believer turns over his life to Christ. He wants the Lord to take over his life and do what He wants to be done in that life.

An important part of this second work of God is that the decision to experience this work is one that the believer can make. The believer who does not want to turn over his life to the Lord can decide to continue to live by the flesh. Growing in sanctification is not automatic.

This second work of grace, making Jesus Lord of your life, is an experience. It is a time when Jesus begins to live through the believer. It is sanctification seen as an exchanged life, based upon Gal 2:20. The believer quits trying to live godly in his own power and allows Christ to live through him. It is entirely passive on the part of the believer. We turn over to Him all our concerns and our attempts at godliness. He will provide all our needs.

The idea that this turning over to God is an emotional experience was seen in the life of Hudson Taylor. He spoke of how he lived in a state of spiritual defeat because he tried to do the work of missions in his own power. It wasn't until he turned his life over to Jesus, after years on the mission field, that he was able to experience joy. He gave it over to Him.

Such an experience of abandonment to Christ and the joy associated with it are reflected in the hymns of perhaps the most famous hymn writer in the Keswick movement. Frances Ridley Havergal wrote hymns like "Like a River Glorious Is God's Perfect Peace" and "Take My Life and Let It Be." These hymns reflect Keswick theology of what happens to a believer who had a crisis of faith and turns his life over to the Lord. They deal with sanctification.

In the next blog, I will discuss the positive and negatives aspects of the Keswick movement, along with how compatible it is with Free Grace theology.

What is the Keswick Movement? (Part 2)

April 4, 2022 by Ken Yates in Blog

In my previous blog (see here), I spoke about the history of the Keswick movement. Keswick theology is concerned about Christian living. Those in the movement have a desire to live godly lives. They want to please God. In this blog I want to address the positive teachings of the movement as well as the negative. Perhaps it would be better to say I am discussing those parts of it with which I am in agreement and those areas with which I am not. Here, I am concentrating on the traditional Evangelical expressions of the movement and not the connection it has with the theology of Wesley or Pentecostalism. Related to these things is how the movement agrees or disagrees with Free Grace theology. As mentioned in the previous blog, it must be kept in mind that not all adherents of Keswick theology agree on all points. The comments here are addressed to the generally held views.

There are a number of positive aspects of Keswick theology. First, it rightly separates justification (receiving eternal life) from sanctification (Christian living/growth in becoming more like Christ). One can be justified but not live godly. This agrees with Free Grace theology.

That leads to the second positive point. Keswick theology recognizes that many Christians are carnal. When we see a carnal person, we cannot say that person is not eternally saved. This agrees with Free Grace theology.

The third positive point is that it maintains that the believer has a choice. He can walk either according to the flesh or according to the Spirit. The decision to live godly falls under the realm of free will. God does not force believers to grow in Christlikeness. It is not automatic. This agrees with Free Grace theology.

The fourth positive point is that it teaches that victorious Christian living can only be lived in the power of the Spirit. Keswick adherents would more likely say it is done by their union with Christ. In any event, Christ is the only One that can produce spiritual fruit. This agrees with the majority of conservative Evangelical views of sanctification.

However, Keswick theology emphasizes this Biblical truth more than most. It maintains that keeping the commandments in our own power, relying on our own strength, leads to Christian failure. We can see many Christians doing what appears to be good works, but they are not pleasing to God because they are not done in the power of the Spirit. Works can be done in a legalistic way, a ritualistic way, in the power of the flesh. This would include things like the spiritual disciplines, like prayer, fasting, and Bible study. This was the experience of the great missionary Hudson Taylor, according to his testimony. It was only when he surrendered everything to Christ that he grew spiritually. The idea that Christians can do "good" legalistic work of no spiritual value agrees with Free Grace theology.

Keswick theology rightly maintains that not all believers abide in Christ. Not all believers are filled (controlled) by the Spirit. Only those believers who abide in Christ will experience the abundant life of John 10:10. Free Grace theology agrees here as well.

With almost all these positive aspects, it can be assumed that Lordship Salvation and Calvinism would disagree and take the opposite view.

There are some negative aspects of Keswick theology with which most (sometimes all) Free Grace would not agree. The first is that Keswick adherents do not see assurance of eternal life as the essence of saving faith. In their view, the second work of grace will cause the believer to grow in assurance as he abides in Christ.

The second area of concern is that the movement is very devotional and mystical. It crosses different denominational lines for that reason. There is not an emphasis on doctrine. The second work of grace is very experiential. This raises concerns among many.

A third area of disagreement would be the idea that sanctification begins with an emotional crisis. Keswick sanctification demands an encounter with the Spirit/Christ, just as at salvation. But does it need to be that dramatic? Can't a believer realize from the study of Scripture that he needs to walk by the power of the Spirit, and can't he simply see the wisdom of doing so? Must he seek some kind of emotional experience, and does this experience validate the reality of this second work of grace?

Related to this area of disagreement is the fact that sanctification is not determined by a one time crisis. We may decide to walk by the Spirit and do so for a period of time and then quit doing do. We can then decide to walk on the path of discipleship later. It is difficult to see in the Scriptures that a single event in one's life is the determinative issue.

A fourth problem concerns the passive nature of sanctification that Keswick theology promotes. A common phrase used is "trust, do not try." Growing in Christlikeness is seen as simply giving everything over to Christ. But doesn't Jesus command us to take up a cross daily to follow Him? Yes, the victorious Christian life can only be done in His power, but we must decide to walk that path with Him. We must decide to make sacrifices for His name. Walking with Christ is not a life where we play no role.

A fifth area of concern is that some traditional adherents use the phrase "second work of grace." This is the same terminology that Pentecostals use to refer to a post-justification baptism of the Spirit and speaking in tongues. This phrase is not in the Bible and causes confusion.

Finally, many Free Grace folks see the Scriptures as playing a key role in sanctification. As we read the Scriptures, we see Christ and understand what He desires of us. We then ask the Spirit to produce that obedience/fruit in us. Keswick theology seems to downplay the role of sound doctrine (and the role of the Scriptures?) and replaces it with an experience with Christ or the Spirit.

As already mentioned, not all those who claim to be followers of the Keswick model of sanctification agree on all points. There are those who agree with certain aspects of the model (perhaps the positive statements above) and disagree with others (for example, the negative aspects discussed here). Those who say they are

“Keswickian” come in many different stripes. I believe most Free Grace people would say they agree with part of it and disagree with others, even if their list is not exactly the same as mine.